

REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE
Pursuant to P.A. 345 Of 2004
Section 1010(2)
Vocational Programming and Recidivism
January 2005

Section 1010(2) of 2004 P.A. 345 requires that the Department of Corrections provide, by February 1 of 2005, a statistical report on the efficacy of department-provided prison vocational education programs in reducing offender recidivism rates. This report is the fulfillment of that requirement.

A recent national study on this topic conducted by Seiter & Kadela, (Prisoner Reentry: What Works, What Does Not, and What is Promising, *Crime and Delinquency*, Vol. 49 No. 3, July 2003 360-388), found vocational training and/or work release programs to be effective in reducing recidivism rates by improving job readiness skills for ex-offenders. According to that study, prison vocational programs are but one component of a successful community reentry strategy for offenders. Vocational training is one of the most important of the educational programs in reducing recidivism rates.

Recent “best practices” research indicates that to expect any one component of a reentry model to unilaterally stop recidivism is unrealistic because all of the risks, needs and strengths of each offender must be sufficiently assessed and addressed – such as the risk of substance abuse relapse, and the need for mental health services and treatment, and the strength of family support.

In the case of prison vocational programs, the Michigan Prisoner ReEntry Initiative (MPRI) model indicates that effectively reducing recidivism will require teaching inmates functional, educational, and vocational competencies based on employment market demand and public safety requirements, providing inmates with opportunities to participate in work assignments and skill building programs, and creating employment opportunities and connecting offenders to employment (including supportive employment and employment services) before their release to the community. Other prisoner reentry components besides prison vocational programs that are directly relevant to these strategies include academic education, the Michigan Prison Build Program and Michigan State Industries. A committee is being formed to explore the complementary roles of these interventions. The MPRI is now only a year old, and the cases in this report received their vocational training and release prior to MPRI, so they did not have the benefit of the components of the entire MPRI model that are being designed, planned and implemented.

For the reasons above, it is important to exercise caution when interpreting the following descriptive statistics and drawing conclusions -- not only with recognition of the limitations of the methodology, but also within the context of the absence of an MPRI model at the time of the program involvement and release outcomes. Still, the information that follows may be useful as a benchmark for comparison to results attained once the MPRI model is fully operational.

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Design and Methodology

All prisoners who were either paroled or discharged on the maximum sentence (either without parole or following parole and return) in September and October 2002 (n=1,780) were used in this report. Information regarding the date of completion was extracted from each vocational programming site computer system data base for all prisoners who were documented as having a vocational program completion. Two year follow ups using CMIS information to determine recidivism were used. The measures of recidivism were return to prison as a violator or abscond from parole. These individual site datasets were combined into one dataset and then matched against the 1,780 cases in the report to determine which cases had a documented vocational program completion any time prior to their September/October 2002 release.

Limitations:

The report was limited to those offenders for whom a completed vocational program could be documented using available automated data and did not consider other barriers to successful community reentry such as substance abuse dependence, mental illness, and other confounding factors. For example, over half of the cases have one or more indications of substance abuse dependence. Furthermore, the program completion data used for this report is fragmented and incomplete. It was collected from local data bases that had variable methods of recording information which could skew the results. The new statewide Offender Education Tracking System (OETS) was not rolled out until July of 2004 and continues to be modified, so program completion information could not be reliably determined from there. In addition, the standards for program completion were not clearly established during the time period covering these cases.

Findings

- 281 (15.8%) of the 1,780 paroled or discharged cases had documentation of vocational program completion prior to their release.
- 85% of the releases with vocational program completions were paroled, and 15% were released on the maximum sentence.
- The overall success rate for parole outcomes is currently 52%. The success rate for those who completed a vocational program is statistically indistinguishable from this overall rate. Specifically, of the 281 cases with a documented vocational program completion, 93 (33%) were returned to prison, 42 (15%) had absconded, and 146 (52%) had either successfully terminated from or remained under parole supervision at the end of the 2-year follow-up period.

Comments

Given the limited scope of this report, the statistics do not lend themselves to drawing substantive conclusions about program efficacy in reducing recidivism rates. The standardization of vocational programs, implementation of the Offender Education Tracking System, and complete implementation of the MPRI model should ensure that the full potential benefits of vocational programming for prisoners are brought to bear on community outcomes following release from prison. Rigorous evaluations of vocational education and all other prisoner programs will be conducted as part of the MPRI process.